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Fahd & Reagan: An Enduring Relationship

By DAVID IGNATIUS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—The two men are as different as the countries they represent: a cautious Bedouin monarch from the Arabian desert and a self-assured ex-movie actor from California. Yet their meeting today at the White House illustrates the surprising durability of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

King Fahd, echoing the theme of a generation of Saudi leaders, will urge President Reagan to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. He'll emphasize that Mr. Reagan—as a strong, second-term president—has a special opportunity to fashion a lasting Mideast settlement. But the Saudi monarch won't be surprised when Mr. Reagan repeats the outlines of the current, low-key American Mideast policy.

The most important fact about the Fahd visit is that it doesn't involve a crisis. The Mideast situation is relatively calm these days, at least compared with the turmoil of the past several years, and both sides are cautioning that today's meeting won't produce any startling announcements about oil, the Palestinian problem, arms sales, or the other issues that have troubled the two countries in the past.

Maturing Relationship

The modest expectations suggest that the U.S.-Saudi relationship—after years of extravagant hopes and bitter disappointments for Washington and Riyadh—is maturing slowly toward something more stable. "We have a whole lot of interests in common," says a State Department official. "We know it and they know it."

The U.S.-Saudi relationship has been marked by frustrations. The Saudis have long hoped that the U.S. would pressure Israel, and impose a settlement of the Palestinian problem; the Americans have expected the Saudis to use their financial leverage to pressure Syria to play a more moderate role in the Mideast. The failure of both gambits illustrates the limits of checkbook diplomacy.

Each nation has often felt mistreated and ill-used by the other. Americans wondered during the 1970s why the Saudis, if they were so friendly, often sided publicly with the radical Arabs on oil issues and Mideast diplomacy. The Saudis, in turn, wondered why the Americans weren't more appreciative of their quiet efforts to restrain oil prices and Palestinian terrorism.

There have often been maddening differences in style. The Saudis tend to be oblique, indirect, eager to avoid direct alliances or confrontations. The Americans



King Fahd and President Reagan like things clear, open, spelled out in writing. A State Department official tells a story that illustrates the cultural conflict.

Several years ago, the story goes, the American ambassador in Riyadh was instructed to obtain a precise answer from King Fahd about an energy issue. In two meetings, the king offered a polite but non-committal response. When the ambassador pressed the question a third time, the king finally gave a definite answer, but eight months elapsed before he granted the ambassador another appointment.

Through all the Mideast turmoil and frustrations of the past decade, there has been a surprising continuity in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. One important reason, says U.S. officials, is King Fahd's role in sustaining a pro-American policy.

American officials recall his first official visit to the U.S. in 1974, when he negotiated the basic framework of the U.S.-Saudi security relationship with then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other American officials. During one sensitive meeting, he agreed to work with the U.S. to help friendly groups in the Islamic world—an understanding that has since meant covert Saudi funding for pro-Western forces in Somalia, Oman, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

In 1977, then-Crown Prince Fahd visited Washington for meetings with President Carter. John West, at the time American ambassador to Riyadh, recalls that in an effort to establish a personal bond with the Saudi leader, President Carter took him upstairs to meet his daughter, Amy, asking her: "Do you want to be hugged by a Saudi prince?" She apparently did and the 1977 visit was a big success.

The Saudis tried hard during the oil crisis years to be friendly toward an America they didn't always understand. Mr. West recalls that in 1979, when oil prices were skyrocketing, Crown Prince Fahd waited until July 4 to announce that the Saudis would boost oil production to maximum capacity—a special Independence

Day present for the U.S.

The Reagan administration has been trying to arrange a Fahd visit to the U.S. for four years. Mr. Reagan met briefly with the Saudi leader in Cancun, Mexico, during the October 1981 North-South economic summit. But the scheduling problems of arranging a U.S. visit illustrate the difficulty of dealing with the skittish Saudis.

Plans for a September 1981 visit were canceled because of the Senate debate over the sale of AWACS radar-surveillance planes to the Saudis; a proposal for a summer 1982 visit was dropped following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The same on-again, off-again pattern continued in recent months until this week's visit was finally set.

Credit for finally arranging King Fahd's trip goes to the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who has lobbied nearly as hard for the U.S. in Riyadh as he has for the Saudis in Washington. Prince Bandar, a former air force pilot and son of the Saudi defense minister, believes the U.S.-Saudi military relationship is crucial for Saudi security. Prince Bandar seems to have the king's ear; by one account he talks with the Saudi monarch two or three times a day.

What Saudis Want

King Fahd wants to influence American policy during his trip. He wants a stronger American role in the peace process, a U.S. commitment to help prevent a sudden fall in oil prices, a tighter embargo on Western arms shipments to Iran, more U.S. covert funding for the Afghanistan rebels, and eventually delivery of 40 additional F-15 fighters for the Saudi air force.

But while the Saudis still look to the U.S. as a friend and a superpower, they may be losing some of their illusions about the ability of any American administration to make dramatic changes in the Mideast or anywhere else. King Fahd noted last week how modern realism can undermine romantic illusions, when he discussed with a group of visiting Americans the possibility that a Saudi astronaut might travel on the U.S. space shuttle.

The Saudi monarch remarked that, in the era of space travel, it has become awkward to use an old Arab proverb that the face of a beautiful woman is like the moon.

"Now that we can travel to the moon, we can see that it has crevices," he observed.